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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: ALMATY NOTES, JANUARY 17-30

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11. The "Almaty Notes" series from U.S. Office Almaty focuses on developments in civil society, the media, and the opposition in Kazakhstan's "southern capital."

OPPOSITION PARTIES: NO OPTION BUT TO BOYCOTT

12. National Social Democratic Party (NSDP) head Zharmakhan Tuyakbay, Azat Party General Secretary Tulegen Zhukeyev, Communist Party leader Serikbolsyn Abdildin, and Auy1 (Village) Party leader Gani Kaliyev told the "Zhas Alash" newspaper that if President Nazarbayev signs the draft law on elections, "we will have no option but to boycott the next elections to the Mazhilis (lower house of Parliament)." Leaders of seven political parties previously stated in December that they would boycott the elections if their proposals were not included in the new election law.

13. On January 21, several political parties addressed an appeal to Nazarbayev asking him to veto not only the election law, but also new laws on political parties and the mass media, which were, in their opinion "drafted by the government and hastily approved by Parliament." The appeal stressed that "the cosmetic amendments do not correspond to Kazakhstan's commitments and OSCE standards and damage the reputation of the country." This appeal was signed by Auy1, Alga, both of Kazakhstan's communist parties, and NSDP. Similar appeals have been issued by Adilet and Ak Zhol.

OPPOSITION PARTIES SUPPORT YESERGEPOV

14. Two opposition parties, Azat and NSDP, issued separate statements demanding that the criminal prosecution of "Alma-Ata Info" newspaper editor-in-chief Ramazan Yesergepov be stopped and Yesergepov released. (NOTE: As reported in reftels, Yesergepov has been charged with publishing classified documents. END NOTE.) The Azat party maintained that the case undermined the reputation of Kazakhstan. The NSDP stressed that freedom of speech was "limited in order to please a specific agency," meaning the Committee for National Security (KNB). Several political party leaders, including Serikbolyn Abdildin of the Communist Party, Vladimir Kosaryev of the

People's Communist Party, Lyudmila Zhulanova of the Ak Zhol Party, and Gani Kaliev of the Auy (Village) Party jointly called on the authorities to stop prosecuting Yesergepov. They stressed that officials who bear responsibility for the leakage of the information should be brought to account, not Yesergepov.

#### "DOLSHIKI" GO ON A HUNGER STRIKE

15. On January 20, twelve activists from the "Leave the Houses to the People" movement began a hunger strike to protest what they see as the government's lack of action in dealing with bad mortgages. The protesters, who were "dolshiki" (i.e., individuals who invested in apartments that have not been completed or have not been built at all), claimed the government is dragging its feet on adopting a mechanism for buying up bad mortgages. Forty-eight people announced their willingness to join the hunger strike if anyone has to suspend his participation due to health problems. The chairman of the local branch of the ruling Nur Otan party announced that a special commission has been set up to solve problems of the "deceived dolshiki." Almaty Deputy Akim (Mayor) Serik Seydumanov called the hunger strike "irresponsible." He told "Vremya" newspaper that some of the protesters are well-to-do real estate investors who want to solve their problems at "the state's expense." "Leave the Houses to the People" organized a separate action on January 27, with more than a hundred activists participating in an impromptu conference at the Eurasia Center.

#### CONSTRUCTION COMPANY MANAGEMENT CONVICTED OF EMBEZZLEMENT

16. On January 26, an Almaty court convicted the management of the "Verniye.kz" construction company of embezzling over 1.5 billion tenge (\$12 million) from "dolshiki." Both the company's director, Maya Abisheva, and her deputy, Lyazzat Yesenova, were sentenced to nine years in jail. The company's bookkeeper was given a year's probation. A lawyer for the "dolshiki," Yermek Koyshinov, said that

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the case would be a lesson and a warning for other construction companies.

#### RETAILERS PROTEST HIGH RENTS

17. On January 20, several hundred retailers from the Alatau market went on strike demanding lower rents. They demanded that the market's management lower rents and other fees to reflect a slow-down in sales resulting from the global economic crisis. On January 22, retailers from the biggest market in Almaty, Altyn Orda, blocked the Almaty-Bishkek highway, also demanding lower rents. Altyn Orda's management agreed to reduce rents, but only for two months. Altyn Orda's retailers said they were not satisfied with the concessions and intend to continue their protests. "The crisis will not end in two months," they argued.

#### ALMATY EMPLOYMENT RATE DROPS

18. Almaty authorities announced that the city's employment contracted over the past three months, with 47,000 jobs lost. The sectors hit the hardest were construction and real estate.

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